

Easy Reader

Harbor lights

Grease and water don't mix

by Harry Munns

Published February 14, 2008

You're having lunch with friends at a restaurant overlooking the harbor on a picture postcard, southern California afternoon. You give the waiter your order. A few feet away in the kitchen, the cook begins making your lunch by placing pieces of meat and fish into pans and on the grill. Heat melts grease and oil that nature infused in the meat and fish.

More heat vaporizes the oil and the powerful range fan draws up all the smoke and blows it out the vent pipe. The cook plates your meal when it's done. Some of the contents of the plates fall onto the floor and other surfaces before the waiter brings it to the dining room. It's time to enjoy the view, the food and the conversation.

Meanwhile, small parts of your meal have collected on the outside wall of the building near the vent pipe. Other fragments have attached themselves to the rubber mats under the feet of the cooks. Whatever you or your friends can't finish, goes into the dumpster behind the restaurant.

The next time it rains their world becomes a city-owned waterpark. Pouring rain lifts them from the building and around the dumpster. Each parking lot, curb and drain pipe acts like a water slide carrying the happy bacteria to what's probably their first swim in the Pacific Ocean. They mix with billions of their friends to form a sort of toxic, living soup. Who knew a couple orders of chicken satay and crab cakes could give your neighbor's kid an ear infection?

In early 2006, Torrance, Redondo, Hermosa and Manhattan Beach all had plans in various stages of development geared toward expanding restaurant inspections. They all focused on new standards to control kitchen waste that could pollute the ocean by traveling through storm drains.

A little push from The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (SMBRC) turned the plans into a full-fledged program. "They (SMBRC) came to us and offered a grant to develop the program," said Redondo Beach city engineer Mike Shay. "The money allowed us to hire a consultant and enabled us to create the Clean Bay Restaurant Certification Program (CBRCP)," Shay said.

Redondo already required restaurants to comply with its FOG (Fats, Oil, Grease) inspection program. "The city requires restaurants to use a variety of methods to prevent FOG materials from entering the city sewer system. Restaurant grease in sewer lines or lack of maintenance of their grease interceptor that results in a plugged sewer main and sewer overflow into the street could result in more severe enforcement action," Shay said.

The additional guidelines for inspection of above-ground pollution sources were intended as more of a carrot than a stick. "The goal is to give the restaurants incentives to help with the city's water quality efforts. By awarding them a certificate, the public knows which restaurants make the extra effort to protect the environment," said Stephen Groner, the consultant SMBRC hired to develop the program.

Restaurant patrons who dislike the idea of swimming next to the byproducts of last week's lunch, can go to the The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission's web site at <http://santamonicaabay.org/>. Click on Clean Bay Restaurant Certification under Quick Links in the lower, right hand corner for a complete list of qualifying restaurants in the South Bay.

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